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ABSTRACT

As an introduction to the role of children's literature in the People's Republic of China, the author provides an overview of the content and themes of Chinese children's literature. The role of amateur writers is discussed and popular works of Chinese children's literature are summarized. The author also contrasts content and objectives of children's literature in China and the United States. Chinese teaching style, which emphasizes political education, publicizes models for emulation and fosters the ideology of collectivism. The American teaching style publicizes creativity, individual worth and gain, and fosters the ideology of capitalism. Eight stories for Chinese children are identified and summarized. All stress the children's contribution to protecting collective property and fighting against imperialism. The books are very inexpensive and are therefore accessible to the working class. In local communities, individual storytellers often become well known for helping to instill proper political and moral values. Books and storytellers both illustrate a basic belief, stemming from Mao's ideas, that influencing and shaping attitudes is by far the most important task of teachers and schools. (Author/AV)

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Occasional Paper #77-6

WHAT CHILDREN READ IN CHINA

BY

Mary Dengler

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PREFACE

"What Children Read in China" is an introduction to the role of children's literature in The People's Republic of China. Mary Dengler, an elementary school teacher, provides an overview of the content and themes of Chinese children's literature, explains the role of the amateur writers, and summarizes some popular works of Chinese children's literature.

Children's literature in the People's Republic of China is not simply for entertainment. It's function is that of education, to teach certain ideo-political "lessons" in keeping with the principles enunciated in Article 12 of the Constitution of The People's Republic of China (adopted on January 17, 1975), which states that:

> "Culture and education, literature and art, physical education, health work and scientific research work must all serve proletarian politics, serve the workers, peasants and soldiers, and be combined with productive labour."

The reader is invited to contrast this with the function and contents of children's literature in the United States.

Dr. Eli Seifman
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ABSTRACT:

To understand education in Communist China, it is important to bear in mind the cardinal principle that "education must serve proletarian politics." Politics has dictated the aims of education, its general direction of effort,and all phases of the program. Since education is an arm of politics, it has been expected to serve as an instrument for attacking Western capitalism and imperialism, for promoting friendship and admiration for the Soviet Union in the early years, and for a relentless assault on Soviet revisionism in later years.

China, under Mao, had been increasingly preoccupied for many years with ensuring the dedication of the young people of China to the interpretation of Communist ideology and the system of government under Communist Party leadership. There has been concern that youth of present day China mainland have not personally experienced the salutary hardening and tempering effects of active participation in civil war and the mass political action campaigns of the early years after the communist takeover of China in 1949. Mao's fears about the softness of contemporary Chinese youth are compounded, furthermore, by his well known and pervasive distrust of all intellectuals, whom he has constantly viewed as essentially unreliable elements. He has consistently seen only the "working class" - meaning primarily the peasants and other manual workers - as his dependable supporters. Thus, the main thrust of his educational policy since 1949 has been to produce a new type of intelligentsia by making the necessary general and specialized education available to politically working class elements insisting that all students be required to receive regular political education in schools and participate regularly in manual labor as part of the school program. (1)

Serve the People

"The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at 8 or 9 in the morning. Our hope is placed on you ...."

Mao Tse-Tung, 1957 (2)

"New China must care for her youth and show concern for the growth of the younger generation. Young people have to study and work, but they are at the age of physical growth. Therefore, full attention must be paid both to their work and study and to their recreation, sport and rest."

Mao Tse-Tung, 1964 (3)

"Children are admirable. They keep wondering what it is like on the moon and stars or under the earth, what different flowers can be used for, how insects speak. They long to fly up to heaven, to crawl down an ant hole .... So we should be most careful what books we give our children, and should take great pains over writing them."

Lu Hsun (4)

A clearly defined educational goal in China is to integrate children into the socialist society, just as American children are trained into the capitalist society through an educational system which transmits values and attitudes needed by capitalism. American schools whether traditional or progressive, less or more permissive, share a common goal; to nurture children to be self-possessed, agressive, competitive and personally successful individuals whose responsibility to social

goals is secondary. The Chinese aim, in contrast, is to teach children to become cooperative and self reliant social beings whose primary concern is working collectively to build socialism and a future classless society devoid of oppression and competition for individual gain.

New China, January 1976

What Children Read in China

There are no books about murders, terrorism, superstitious practices and unhealthy fantasies, or those extolling the bourgeois reactionary philosophy of getting rich quick and leading a lazy, comfortable life, which they believe poison the thinking of the young. Instead of reading about mythical palaces and hoards of gold and treasure conjured up by fairies at the touch of a magic wand, children in China now read how alkaline wasteland has been turned into fertile fields and barren hills into rich orchards through the strenuous collective work of the commune members and their children.

Deep concern for securing adequate reading material for their children is shown by the Chinese Communist Party and the people's government at all levels. Publishing houses in Peking, Tientsin, Shanghai and all provinces and autonomous regions have people whose main responsibility is the publication of reading matter for children.

In the People's Literature Publishing House in Peking and the Shanghai People's Publishing House, the editors of children's literature make regular rounds of kindergartens, primary and middle schools to find out what young readers like and want. They use their findings to get novels, short stories, fables and other forms of literature for different age groups.

Publishers also put out books of popular, easy readings for children on politics, history, natural science and other subjects.

To ensure that children's reading material is available to all, it is sold at a very low price, most items being no more than 20 or 30 fen (10 or 15 U.S. cents).

Peking, Shanghai, Wuhan and other cities have special children's libraries. Staff members of the Peking Children's Library take their reading material and

visit schools and neighborhood communities and help provide guidance for young readers.

The Hsinhua Bookstore in Peking and other big cities have a free book-lending service and provide space where children can read on the spot. Great numbers use this space daily.

In addition to various newspapers and literary periodicals that regularly carry articles for children, there are special children's newspapers and periodicals published locally in provinces and cities. The Shanghai weekly newspaper Little Red Guard has wide circulation. (5)

Chang Teng - kuei

Chang Teng - kuei is a cadre in the People's Liberation Army Railway Engineering Corps. When he is on home leave the children in his neighborhood flock to hear him tell stories and he often gives talks in schools. Children meeting him on the street clamor, "Uncle, tell us a story." He seldom refuses and is always able to come up with something exciting that takes only a few minutes to tell.

In 1950, Change Teng - kuei fought in Korea with the Chinese People's Volunteers. Back in China in 1953, he had many stories to tell the young people about the part played by Korean children in the fight against the enemy. These won the hearts of his young listeners and later he wrote them down for publication. Since then he has written many stories in his spare time. A collection entitled Roads That Can Speak, with the title story about defense work in a border area, is due off the press shortly.

Chang Teng - kuei is only one of the large numbers of amateur writers of stories for children in the ranks of the workers, peasants and army-men. The

work of these amateurs is augmented by the writings of many professionals, including well known writers and poets of adult literature. The fact that in every city district of Peking there is a group of writers of children's literature under the direction of the cultural bureaus is an indication of how widespread this branch of writing has become. It plays an important role in the education of the young. (6)

Popular Children's Literature in China Today

Little Sisters of the Grassland - Foreign Language Press, Peking 1973

This book is based on the animated cartoon of the same title. It tells the story of two Mongolian sisters of Inner Mongolia grassland. In order to protect commune sheep, eleven year old Lungmei and her nine year old sister, Yuyung, battle a blizzard for a whole day and night with the temperature at 37°C. below zero in order to protect commune sheep.

This book is one of a very important series that has been much developed in the last few years. It is a picture-story series with a picture to a page and the necessary explanations at the foot.

The Cock Crows at Midnight- Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1973

Before China's liberation in 1949 when the peasantry was ground down by the landlord class, there were countless incidents in which peasants rose in heroic resistence. The story told here is about one such incident.

Young Pao and other land workers oppressed by the landlord Skinflint are stirred by their hatred to struggle against him. Educated and organized by an underground Communist, they unite in struggle and finally defeat the cruel landlord's plot against them. They then join the guerrillas and take up arms to fight all such class oppression.

The pictures in this book are stills from the Marionette film of the same name produced by the Shanghai Anomation Film Studio.

Huang Chi-kuang, A Hero To Remember - Edited by the Shanghai Juvenile Publishing House, Peking

This is a story of a poor peasant boy who grows up and joins the Chinese volunteers in Korea, giving his life for the international struggle against imperialism.

Little Ching and Hu Tzu Guard the Cornfield. Edited and Illustrated by Ku Yu-Tseng, Chang Chih and Li Jui-sheng Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1974

The problems incurred by two young children watching over a commune cornfield are told here. Their aunts' geese have done much harm to the cornfield. Not wanting to harm the geese they gag their bills with pieces of a willow branch. Aunty Chang is angry because the children have gagged the geese. However, all is settled after a discussion Auntie Chang agrees that the children are right because everyone should protect collective property.

Flowers in Full Bloom, Written by Huang Ching-yung, Drawings by Lin Wan-tsui, Edited by the Kwangtung Peoples Publishing House, Foreign Language Press, Peking 1966

This is a book of short poems and colorful illustrations of a young girl's work on a commune.

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The Sandy Land

The sandy land,
Stretching far,
We've turned it now to paddy fields,
We stoop to plant the seedlings,
Each one set in the water clear.

The love of 'manual labor' is clearly shown in the above two books. The authors of these books show an intimate knowledge of the land, the crops, the wild life, the weather, the cycle of night and day, and the people working the land and depending on it. No task seems humdrum or unimportant and the children are involved in a whole society's enthusiastic activity.

How the Foal Crossed the Stream, Adapted by Ming Yang, Drawings by Chen Yung-Chen. Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1976

This is a fable of a young foal who finds that investigation is important before undertaking a new task. It tells us when we don't understand something, we should first find out exactly what the problem is, think about it and be sure we know the situation. Then we can decide what to do.

Three Sweaters, Wang Sen. Foreign Language Press, Peking 1975

After hearing the morning weather forecast Little Chin, a thoughtful kindergartener, brings extra sweaters to school for two friends whose mothers work an early shift.

Little Pals, Lin Wan-tsui, Foreign Language Press, Peking 1974

This book illustrates everyday work and play like "regular bathing," "washing clothes" and doing homework carefully."

In the last two books the children learn about hygiene and of all the little jobs they can do in the kindergarten or at home, learning to take care of themselves and 'serve the people.'

An Observation

In the foregoing pages of this study on children's literature in China it is hoped that it becomes readily apparent to the reader that one of the most important aspects of the Chinese educational system has been the prominence of political education at all levels in the school system. The Chinese approach clearly illustrates one point of view concerning a fundamental question - the appropriate nature and role of moral/spiritual/political values in public education. It reflects a basic belief, stemming from Mao's ideas, that influencing and shaping attitudes is by far the most important task of teachers and schools.

The child in China is to be treated as a young comrade, cherished and protected, but sharing in the life, the struggles, the achievements and the aspirations of their elders.

This certainly is in direct contrast to the literature that the American child is exposed to. Books publicizing murder, terrorism, or spreading mysticism, science fiction, tales about palaces and treasures produced by fairies with the touch of a magic wand, so prevalent in the libraries and schools of America, are not to be found in China. They are not to be deluded by pretty fantasies or entertained with horrors or senseless violence. They believe that children's books should depict brave and devoted heroes and heroines to be taken as models. They should teach how to serve the people and inculcate a respect for manual labor.

Children are what education is all about, whether in the United States or in China. It certainly is interesting to take a small part of an educational system, like children's literature and to be able to analyze the philosophy behind that system. Chine: teaching style is to publicize models for emulation, to foster the

ideology of collectivism. The American teaching style is to publicize creativity, individual worth, individual gain, to foster the ideology of capitalism.

FOOT NOTES

1 - Chen, Theodore, "International Aspects of Education in Communist China," Phi Delta Kappan, January, 1970, p. 251.

2 - Quotations From Chairman Mao-Tse Tung, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1972, p. 290.

3 - Barendsen, Robert D., "Mao's Education," American Education, May 1972, p. 4.

4 - Gray, Noel, "Chinese Children," China Now, January, 1976, No. 58., p. 7.

5 - Ibid.

6 - Whitehead, Rhea, "How the Young Are Taught in Mao's China", Education Digest, May, 1972, p. 17.

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